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# Assessing the Needs of Service Members and Their Families

## A New Approach

Since the advent of the all-volunteer force in the 1970s, military personnel support programs have grown and continue to grow. A 1988 Department of Defense (DoD) directive requires such programs to be responsive to the needs of service members and their families. Unfortunately, DoD does not have a systematic way to determine what those needs are. Traditional program evaluation focuses on the use of specific programs rather than the needs of DoD families. This shortfall is remedied in a new survey design framework developed by the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) and sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

### Framing an Approach for Understanding Military Family Needs

The approach taken by RAND puts the assessments of service members and their families at the center of the analysis. It connects their perceptions of their greatest problems and needs to available resources and to how well the resources they contacted meet their needs (see the figure on the back). Linked questions in the survey framework are as follows:

1. What is the context (e.g., demographic measures, deployment history)?
2. What did respondents experience as problems across several domains (e.g., health, finances, child well-being, spouse employment)?
3. What types of assistance (e.g., information, counseling, education) did respondents believe they needed to address their most significant problems?
4. What resources (military and nonmilitary) did personnel or their spouses contact to try to meet their needs?
5. What factors made these resources easier or more difficult to access?
6. Did the resources help the respondents meet their needs?

### Abstract

- A new approach to surveying service members and their families places their needs, rather than evaluation of existing programs, at the center of the inquiry.
- In this approach, military personnel and family members identify high-priority problems they face; these are linked to their high-priority needs, which are then linked to resources they have contacted and the effectiveness of those resources.
- A survey instrument embodying this approach was developed with input from service members, spouses, service providers, military leadership, and program managers and was tested on two military bases.
- The new approach is adaptable to other instruments, for other populations, and in other contexts.

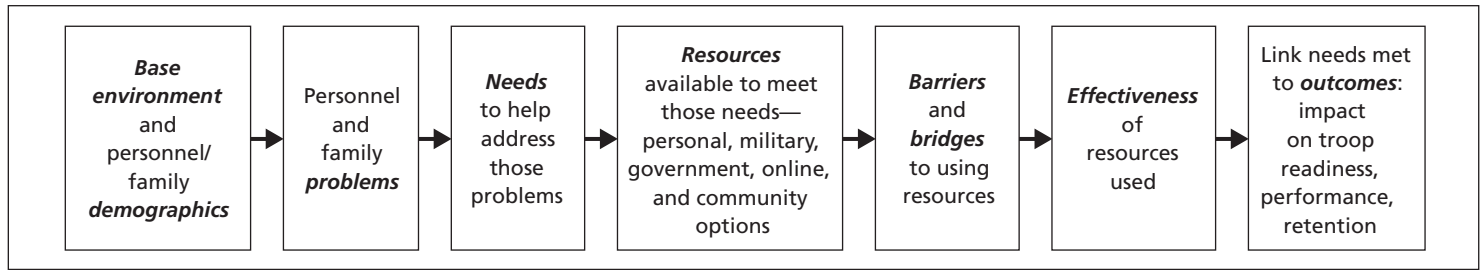
7. Is there a connection between needs met and service member and family satisfaction, readiness, and retention?

### Designing a Survey to Help the Military Support Its Members and Their Families

Using the design framework, the NDRI project team developed a sample survey instrument to assess the needs of active-component single and married service members and spouses. To develop the survey content, the team synthesized information from a variety of sources: focus groups with Army and Marine Corps service members, spouses, and support providers; meetings with subject matter experts and military leadership; and a review of previous research and existing DoD survey instruments pertaining to military

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## Framework for Assessing the Needs of Military Personnel and Their Families



quality of life and family issues. The types of problems addressed in the survey—child care, mental health, relocations, etc.—are not new. What is new is the framework.

Following this framework, the new survey asks first about problems, then about help needed to address those specific problems, then about resources that might have been used to address those specific needs, and so forth. Because the various combinations of specific problems, needs, and resources could grow unwieldy, the survey asks respondents to choose their two most important problems, and for each problem, their two most important needs. Then it delves further into those four problem/need combinations. The survey was tested at two military bases to learn about securing participation and to gain new insights regarding content and respondent burden. The average survey response time was 18 minutes.<sup>1</sup>

### Managing Obstacles to Implementation

To benefit from the cohesive design of the proposed survey, the assessment should be implemented on a large scale (e.g., battalion, base, major command) and administered via the Internet. Smaller-scale implementation could provide some useful information in each of the categories of problems, needs, and resources. However, the value of linking the sections of the survey to each other would then be lost because too few data about each problem/need combination would be available to permit meaningful statistical analyses by demographic characteristics or types of resources used.

Because of the dynamic branching of the survey instrument to account for respondent-provided problem and need priorities, administration by paper is not feasible. For those

without home Internet access, the military could provide respondents on-base access or information about nearby locations that provide free access.

The greatest implementation challenges lie in recruiting participants. Unit and installation commanders could promote participation in the survey by verifying its legitimacy, endorsing the effort, permitting service members to participate during the workday, providing the survey team with access to contact information for service members, and helping to solicit accurate spousal contact information.

### Making Use of the Results

The new survey could provide information whose utility ranges well beyond a snapshot of service member and family quality of life and well-being. For instance, the survey's attention to both military and nonmilitary resources will give base commanders a sense of the leverage they can gain from civilian services. Also, the survey can inform program managers about unmet needs in their military community and reasons personnel and family members do or do not use their services. Such information could help those managers fine-tune their services—or find referrals for some of their prospective clients to other resources, where appropriate to the problem and need.

### Other Applications of the Framework

The RAND framework is flexible and adaptable. Questionnaire items can be modified to reflect evolving needs and concerns and to capture changes in resources available to help personnel or their families. The framework could easily be applied to other populations, such as veterans and their families, guard and reserve personnel and their families, or wounded service members—or for other purposes entirely, such as an assessment of the operational challenges, needs, and resources of military personnel serving in war zones. ■

<sup>1</sup> Further specifics of the survey design process of potential interest to survey researchers can be found in the project documentation cited below.

This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute, documented in *A New Approach for Assessing the Needs of Service Members and Their Families*, by Laura L. Miller, Bernard D. Rostker, Rachel M. Burns, Dionne Barnes-Proby, Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, and Terry R. West, MG-1124-OSD, 2011, 158 pp., \$29.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-5874-4 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1124.html>). This research brief was written by James Chiesa. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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